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ABSTRACT

Europe's socioeconomic climate will undergo rapid change as the single market becomes a reality and technological change accelerates. With companies in some countries now spending more collectively on training than their governments spend on the higher education sector, it is essential to map out a new European strategy for training for the 1990s. This strategy should include the following key components: training information systems, interinstitutional networks, economic and social cohesion, individual achievements profiles, modular course construction, and distance learning. The absolute distinction between institutional and distance learning will likely disappear. The role, scope, and scale of open distance learning in the European Community will expand greatly in response to the general upgrading of skills and knowledge that will be required as economies become much more knowledge dependent. Another important factor is the demographic challenge posed by the overall aging of the population. The European Association of Distance Teaching Universities will play an important role in the expansion of open distance learning in Europe in promoting collaboration between open universities and traditional institutions and in serving as a permanent "lobbyist" for open distance learning at the European Community level. (MN)

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Feature Article

Higher Level Open Distance Learning in Europe: The Accelerating Pace of Change

The following edited article was presented as the keynote address by R. CHARTERS D'AZEVEDO, CEC Head of Division, Task Force Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth, CEC - Commission of the European Communities, to the SADE/EADTU Conference in Umeå 6th March 1992.

The introduction to Mr. Azevedo's address outlined issues pertaining to the Maastricht Agreement as laying the foundations for the implementation of new European education and training initiatives for the nineties and beyond. (Refer EADTU News Issue no.9).

The Accelerating Pace of Change

Human resources will be a priority for the 1990s because the decade will be characterised by further economic restructuring so prominent as a feature of the 1980s. This restructuring will concern a wide range of economic sectors. At the same time the general socio-economic climate will undergo rapid change as the Single Market becomes a reality and technological change accelerates - with a particular market effect on the structure of qualifications and their evolution.

Adapting the qualifications and the training systems to the requirements of technological changes must constitute a key objective for all of us, both at European and national levels. For this reason Community programmes like COMETT[1], ERASMUS[2], EUROTECNET[3], PETRA[4], LINGUA[5], TEMPUS[6] and the European Foundation for Training, are in the forefront of what we may call a consolidation of the work done, rather than the expansion in this field.

With companies in some countries now spending more collectively on training than their governments spend on the university and higher education sector, it is essential to map out a new European strategy for training for the 1990's forging a much stronger and explicit partnership between the public and private sectors whilst fully engaging the regions and key sectors in the process.

- Training Information Systems: If individuals are to be able to fit the available training opportunities to their personal needs, major developments in training information systems, both in the Member States and at the European level, will be necessary. The foundation stone of efficient markets is information about supply alternatives and eventually their prices. A good start would be made if individuals and institutions on the demand-side had access to information on what is available. At the European level, the Commission is considering how to stimulate such information systems as part of a programme on Trans-European Networks to be established to ensure that the Single Market can function effectively. The two recent calls for expressions of interest on an European data base on higher education[7] and on a computer bulletin boards system in the field of education and training[8], are the tip of this iceberg.

- Inter-Institutional networks: This problem is not so much to create new education and training structures as to help existing national and regional agencies to co-operate so as to respond faster and more flexibly to the needs of individuals.

- Economic and Social Cohesion: Among the main factors responsible for lagging development are the state of specific infrastructures, the availability of skilled labour and training opportunities. For example, the percentage of young people between the ages of 15 and 19 who are serving an apprenticeship or undergoing training in the three least advanced Member States is just over half the corresponding figure for the three most advanced countries. Other examples exist in declining industrial areas. The emphasis then, is placed on developing business and vocational training within the Structural Funds, rather than focusing on 'overall infrastructure' as in the past.

- Individual Achievements Profiles: The skills and competence capital which individuals accumulate during their life-time is some times lost because qualifications are only recognised in discrete blocks, sometimes by examination or professional certification. Individual achievements profiles are now being developed in many

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Member States so as to facilitate a more individualised, flexible approach to individual skill achievement. Such an approach is essential to the success of PETRA and FORCE Programmes.

– Modular Course Construction: It may still be necessary to train professional elites in three to four year courses in single institutions, but this is entirely inappropriate for the life-cycle needs. The flexible, life-time accumulation of human capital need by the majority of the population requires a modular approach to course construction.

– Distance Learning: All of the above features can be applied in distance learning, to which the Community has devoted considerable attention. Distance learning systems are simply the extreme case of flexible, modular, networked educational training, addressed to individual consumers and taking advantage of modern information and communications technologies.

The absolute distinction between 'institutional' and 'distance' learning is in fact likely to disappear.

The Future: Our Ambitions for European Open Distance Learning

The role of distance education and training in furthering the objectives and policies of the Community and the possibilities for future action at Community, Member State and institutional level are explored in a memorandum entitled 'Open Distance Learning in the European Community'[9]. Emphasizing the importance of this medium of education and training the Council and Ministers of Education have asked the Commission to formulate proposals in this field.

A memorandum on 'Higher Education in the European Community'[10] and a Memorandum on 'Vocational Training in the European Community in 1990's'[11] have also been issued recently. The former contains a chapter which seeks to identify the role which can be played by open distance learning in higher education in the future, particularly in the context of servicing the growing demand for continuing education and reinforcing the provision for a European dimension. The latter memorandum is important in identifying the context for initiatives in Open Distance Learning in vocational training policies.

It is timely then to look into the future and the developments of distance education and training. It is evident that those better educated and qualified, who could more readily adapt to changing work requirements, enjoy greater job stability and higher living standards. It is in the light of such a situation that the Community is proposing a right of access to continuing training for workers in companies[12].

There are particular considerations attached to open distance learning, which require interventions at community level if this area is to be planned with foresight and imagination. The present development of open distance learning on a European scale is notably at university level and in the advanced technological area. In some Member States public and private open distance learning institutions are providing for vocational training, but on a limited scale. There is also a considerable experience of language teaching and learning through open distance learning methods in most Member States.

In order to serve the economic, social and political purposes of the community it is clear that the scope of distance learning needs to be vastly widened. A role for open distance learning which would contribute to the development of higher education initial vocational training and continuing education – sectors that are of interest for the Community.

There is a need for industrial sectors to adapt to new products and processes. A general upgrading of skills and knowledge is required in the labour force as economies become more knowledge-dependent. There is also a necessity for updating caused by the rapid obsolescence of knowledge itself. High rates of unemployment and redundancy exist side by side with substantial skills shortages as economies undergo modernisation. The persistence of regional disparities continue to pose problems for cohesion within the Community and the evolution of new policies for agriculture require transformation in the pattern of economic activity among populations in rural areas. Structural problems continue to militate against a higher rate of participation of women in the workforce, particularly those who wish to return the labour market following a period of exercising family responsibilities. There is a need to deliver technical assistance on massive scale to the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe and to strengthen the consciousness of political union within the Community through the widespread dissemination of European languages and cultures. All of these challenges must be addressed by significant intervention in the area of human resources development and call for action in the field of 'Open Distance Learning'.

Within the Community, the demographic context of these challenges is one in which the younger population, on which we rely to replenish the labour force and revitalise it with new knowledge and skills, is declining. The population overall is ageing. This has important implications for increased adult dependency. In these circumstances even a small proportion of the workforce cannot be allowed to become or remain redundant, nor can any portion of the potential labour pool be permitted to remain untapped merely because we cannot supply training and retraining where and when it is required. We also cannot afford to overlook the enhancement of productivity which

results from a strengthening of the knowledge and skills of the existing workforce. 'Open Distance Learning' is a powerful tool which can help us deliver these services. There are many other areas where open distance learning

by reason of its flexibility and its relative independence of constraint of time, place and pace can make an important contribution. New opportunities for education and training throughout the European Community are accordingly envisaged in the memorandum 'Open Distance Learning in the European Community'. This memorandum positions open distance learning in the context of improving access to continuing training for workers and professionals (with special attention to SMEs and less favoured regions) as well as in the context of stimulating innovation in conventional education and training and, in particular, in higher education and advanced training. Education and training are seen as prime determinants of economic success and fears are frequently expressed that investment in research and development and in technological improvement may not yield the expected returns without an accompanying effort in the development of human resources. IRDAC[13] observes that a large structural effort in distance and flexible learning is required in Europe.

The application of modern information and communication technologies in multimedia could improve the quality and reach of open distance learning. Traditional systems, such as those of the open universities in Europe should be assisted in directing their actions more towards industrial environments.

The productivity of the economy is dependent on the productivity of education and training. All the European efforts in the field of open distance learning will also have impact on the European electronic and telecommunication industry, which identifies learning technology as a significant growth area. A balanced European investment in this new training provision could be the first step for further developments, in fact, education and training has now been given further impetus by the pace of political developments in Europe. The time and distance constraints, the cost of non-investment in education, the importance of continuing training for competitiveness of enterprises and the importance of the European scenario of research and application of advanced learning technologies, brings me to stress, once more, the necessity to use open and distance learning, to create a telematic system of information and a network of databases on courses and qualifications, as an integral approach to deal with continuing training issues. As you know, these new flexible ways of learning and communications have been developed in last 20 years (note the UK Open University experience). With the development of the new technologies of information and communication distance learning is more in the forefront of the solutions, notably for small and medium size companies and for delivering training for remote and rural areas. Also, the access and exchange of information on qualifications and existing courses and training activities at Member States level, are an urgent necessity. Through, notably, the EUROFORM Community Initiative, the Member States can have financial support for these activities – if they work in such collaborative ventures.

In Conclusion

The last issue of EADTU News has been introduced by your Secretary General, Chris van Seventer, under the title:'A vision for the future: The way forward?' I have read this introduction with great interest, because it is putting forward important issues, which are also of concern to the future Commission's proposals on this field.

The author has analysed the changing European environment of the Open and Distance Teaching Universities and their association, the EADTU. He is concluding that the EADTU should envisage a wider approach for the development of its activities, than the relatively isolated structure of only open universities.

I fully agree with Chris van Seventer that open distance learning is an essential part of the solution to Europe's urgent education and training needs. In Europe, in the geographic EUROPE, I believe we can only succeed through a new deal involving public/private cooperation - firms and education, training and research institutions getting to act together – but with some recognised rules of the game. We need to improve information and counselling systems so that individuals can chose rationally; we need to make further rapid progress on the transferability of qualifications, credits and experience; we need a considerable breakthrough with regard to the participation of women and most importantly of all, we need to clarify who pays for what training. I also agree

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with his opinion that other public and private education and training providers will seek to develop open distance learning as mentioned in the 'Memorandum on Open Distance Learning'. The Commission has the intention to promote these developments.

In my opinion the productivity of the economy is dependent on the productivity of education and training. Higher productivity will require better management of education systems. Use of advanced learning technologies and distance learning are some of the solutions.

In view of these developments, I see an important role for EADTU:

– Firstly the expertise of the Open and Distance Teaching Universities is indispensable for the innovation of the traditional higher education provisions. The proposed action in ERASMUS for open distance learning should promote collaboration between open universities and traditional institutions, aiming at the widening of access to higher education, as well as at the improving of the quality of higher education, by incorporating open university courses and developing multimedia competence in higher education institutions. I am very pleased that this important role for EADTU is also advocated in the 'Introduction' of EADTU News.

– Secondly, it is my firm belief that EADTU should also play its role for the innovation of vocational training in Europe, notably in the less favoured regions of the Community, where infrastructures for education and training are weak. However this would imply that EADTU and its Members should seek strategic partnerships with local or regional institutions, as well (in some cases) with other European partners, such as satellite operators, and with national PTT's and broadcasting companies. I think that the models for 'EUROSTUDY CENTRES' as they are developed by EADTU are very promising. The Community initiative EUROFORM has the will to accept this action. The European Structural Regional Fund is able to finance the physical infrastructure.

– Thirdly, in the treatment of these issues it is essential to bear in mind that basic education on the one hand, and training on the other, are inescapably linked.
It is clear, for example, that the competences which we need to give priority to in training are increasingly 'educational' – particularly in the case of social and communication skills – whilst basic education must not only assure a good knowledge of subjects but also a foundation of general competences on which learning in later professional life can be built. This interaction between training and education is fundamental in planning for the provision of each in the years ahead.

Concerning the opportunities and priorities for EADTU, which are proposed by Chris van Seventer in his Introduction, I would like to give the following reaction. The Commission recognises the important role of EADTU as a permanent 'lobbyist' for open distance learning at Community level. We do appreciate this role of EADTU's. We want you to continue lobbying during the years to come, because any Community action or initiative in the field of 'Open Distance Learning' should be modelled in close collaboration with the interested parties at Member State level as well as at Community level.

Taking into consideration the broad range of interests and possible fields for Community action, there is a need for a broad platform to shape the strategic development of open distance learning in Europe. The Commission would appreciate EADTU playing a key role in the development of the implementation of these activities.

Notes

[1] COMETT - Programme on cooperation between universities and enterprises regarding training in the field of technology
[2] ERASMUS - Inter-university cooperation and mobility of students
[3] EUROTECNET - Inovation in the field of Vocational Training resulting from technological change
[4] PETRA - Youth Training
[5] LINGUA - Foreign Languages competence in EC
[6] TEMPUS - Higher Education cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries
[7] OJ C34 on 12.2.92
[8] OJ C19 on 25.1.92
[9] COM(91) 388 final, on 12.11.91
[10] COM(91) 349 final, on 5.11.91
[11] COM(91) 397 final, on 12.12.91
[12] Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers
[13] Skills Shortages in Europe, IRDAC (Industrial Research Development Advisory Committee of the Commission of the European Communities), Nov 1991.

The Treaty of European Union

Articles 126 and 127 of the Treaty of European Union as relevant to open distance learning are reproduced below from EADTU Newsletter 9

Article 126

1 The Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging co-operation between Member States and if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.

2 Community action shall be aimed at:
- developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States;
- encouraging mobility of students and teachers, inter alia by encouraging the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study;
- promoting co-operation between educational establishments;
- developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the Member States;
- encouraging the development of youth exchanges and of exchanges of socio-educational instructors;
- encouraging the development of distance education.

3 The Community and the Member States shall foster co-operation with third countries and the competent international organizations in the sphere of education, and in particular with the Council of Europe.

4 In order to contribute to the achievement of the objectives referred to in this Article, the Council shall adopt:
- in accordance with the procedure in Article 189b and after consulting the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions incentive measures, excluding any harmonization of the laws and regulation of the Member States;
- acting by qualified majority on a proposal by the Commission's recommendations.

Article 127

1 The Community shall implement a vocational training policy which shall support and supplement the action of the Member States, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content and organization of vocational training.

2 Community action shall aim to:
- facilitate adaptation to industrial changes, in particular through training and vocational retraining;
- improve initial vocational training and continuous training in order to facilitate vocational integration and reintegration into the labour market
- facilitate access to vocational training and encourage mobility of instructors and trainees and particularly young people;
- stimulate co-operation on training between training establishments and firms;
- develop exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the training systems of the Member States.

For the purposes of implementing this action, with reference to workers, Article 118b shall apply.
3 The Community and the Member States shall foster co-operation with third countries and the competent international organizations in the sphere of vocational training.
4 The Council, acting in accordance with the procedure referred to in Article 189c and after consulting the Economic and Social Committee, shall adopt measures to contribute to the achievement of the objectives referred to in this Article, excluding any harmonization of the laws and regulations of the Member States.